



KEVORKIAN, HAGOP

KEVORKIAN, HAGOP (b. Kayseri, central Anatolia, ca. 1872; d. Paris, 10 February 1962); Armenian collector, dealer, and “taste maker” specializing in the arts of the pre-Islamic and Islamic Near East ([PLATE I](#)). He was an influential figure during the formative period of connoisseurship in these fields in the first half of the twentieth century. Although he was deeply involved in collecting over a long period of time, the available information about his personal life and professional career is fragmentary and remains dispersed.

Very little is known and published concerning Kevorkian’s life, especially his early years. He was probably born between 1872 and 1880 in Kayseri (Qayşariya) in central Anatolia, a town with a sizable Armenian community at the time. He may have attended Robert College in Istanbul, which was the first American sponsored college founded outside the United States. Hagop Kevorkian adopted a daughter, Marjorie Kevorkian.

Kevorkian was one of a group of art dealers of Armenian descent who established themselves in Europe around the turn of the century and later in America, introducing objects from Turkey, Iran, and Syria to the art market (Jenkins-Madina, pp.72-76; Vernoit 2000, p. 31), and which included such other noted dealers as Kirkor Minassian (ca.1874-1944) and Dikran Garabed Kelekian (1868-1951), both from the same locality. A brother, Carnig Kevorkian, opened a business selling art in Paris in the 1900s. His Galerie Kevorkian has operated from the same location in Paris since 1923 and is managed by his grand daughter Corinne Kevorkian. For the early years, Hagop



and Carnig may have been working together and it is not always clear to which brother early references to “Kevorkian” indicate.

Hagop Kevorkian probably also started a business dealing in art in London around the 1900s. Beginning in 1910, he took a series of trips to New York to exhibit his collection, finally settling there. Over his lifetime he traveled frequently between New York, Europe, and the Middle East and was “...reputed to have had a network of relatives spread over the Near East and Levant, through whose agency many fine objects reached him in New York” (Robinson, 2000, p. 154).

Kevorkian worked with private clients as well as museums in their acquisition of objects while also forming his own substantial collection. Archival material relating to Kevorkian such as business letters, loan agreements, and acquisition papers scattered in museum archives as well as numerous auction catalogues of his collections during his lifetime and after would help to reconstruct Kevorkian’s influence on collecting in the first half of the twentieth century. This preliminary research is particularly necessary in his case as Kevorkian appears to have been intensely private and guarded his personal and business affairs with the result that much that is written about him is anecdotal; for example, he has been described as “powerful and mysterious” (Grabar, p. 194).

Kevorkian’s presentation of his self-image is also important in this context, especially in newspaper articles about his activities published in the early twentieth century. He described himself as an archaeologist as early as 1911 (and later also as explorer and excavator) highlighting his involvement in work at two sites in Iran, Solţānābād and Ray, both of which produced Islamic period material (Kevorkian, 1911, p. 183; Eberlein, p. 223). Even at this early stage in the field of Islamic archaeology, such statements should be questioned and qualified. It would be more accurate to say that he was one of a number of individuals involved in commercial excavations at sites producing large quantities of antiquities, which would then appear on the art market. Some of these sites would later be scientifically excavated (Rante, pp. 1-3); and as Stephen Vernoit points out with reference to Kevorkian and the above-mentioned sites, “a detrimental consequence of commercial digging was that it obscured the origins of items and encouraged the use of vague terminology” (Vernoit, 2017, p. 1185). However this identification persists and even in more recent literature he is described as an archaeologist directing excavations (Olbrantz, p. 43; Riedel, p. 293).



Kevorkian became a member of the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (London) in 1902, a member of the American Oriental Society in 1927, and a member of the Explorers Club (New York) around 1935. Although it is unclear to what extent he participated in the activities of these societies, his associations with them undoubtedly was part of the creation of his self-image.

Kevorkian assembled an outstanding collection of art over many decades. According to a report prepared in 1952, he began collecting at the end of the 19th century, "...first at Cesaria in Cappadocia, then in Constantinople" (Baltrušaitis, p. 1). Prominent in material categorized as Islamic and Persian (both pre-Islamic and Islamic), it included objects as diverse as ceramics, miniature paintings, bronzes, carpets, and tile panels as well as Egyptian, Classical, and Indian antiquities (Baltrušaitis; Robinson). Beginning in 1911, he frequently exhibited these works in galleries such as the Persian Art Gallery (London), which he most likely owned, Folsom Galleries (New York), Galleries of Charles of London (New York), Anderson Galleries (New York), and Kevorkian Galleries at 40 West 57th street in New York. He contributed objects to major exhibitions of Islamic and Persian art such as the "The Exhibition of Masterpieces of Muhammedan Art," Munich, 1910; The International Exhibition of Persian Art at Burlington House, London, 1931; The Exhibition of Persian Art at the Brooklyn Museum, New York, 1931; and The Exhibition of Persian Art at the Iranian Institute in New York, 1940. Kevorkian established particularly close relationships with museums, sometimes displaying objects on loan. He both sold and gifted a great number of objects to many museums, among them the Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York; the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; the Detroit Institute of Arts; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; and the Seattle Art Museum. A few of the most notable acquisitions include an important collection of Assyrian reliefs at the Brooklyn Museum; the "Damascus Room" at The Metropolitan Museum of Art; and the Varāmin *mehrāb* at the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, Honolulu. Hagop Kevorkian's name and legacy have survived through the work of The Hagop Kevorkian Fund, a foundation intended to promote interest in Near and Middle Eastern arts. Created ten years before his death (it was granted charitable status in 1952), Kevorkian transferred ownership of his collection to the foundation during his lifetime. The foundation became an important supporter for Middle Eastern studies especially in New York City, establishing the Kevorkian Chair of



Iranian Studies at Columbia University and the Hagop Kevorkian Center of Near Eastern Studies at New York University, among other activities. It has been an important source of support at The Metropolitan Museum where it has funded fellowships, employees, publications, acquisitions, and installations. The Kevorkian Fund has also supported publications, endowed positions, and exhibitions at other universities and museums including the University of Pennsylvania and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. After his death the Kevorkian Collection was sold at auctions over the years to raise funds for the foundation.

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